

## The potentials of graffiti in opposing the women economic oppression: The Kosovo case

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### Abstract

Urban art in general, and graffiti in particular, has a multitude of artistic, cultural and social effects. Numerous studies explain its multidimensional role. This article specifically aims to address the potential that graffiti has in expressing revolt and opposition to the women economic oppression. Finally, the feminist movement in Kosovo has started to use graffiti as a tool to raise concerns about the position of women in society. The study objective of this article is the graffiti that shows discrimination against women as the workforce on three levels: unpaid work, paid work at the public sector, as well as the illegal exploitation of paid work in the private sector.

**Keywords:** Graffiti, revolt, feminism, women, workforce, unpaid work, Kosovo

### 1- Introduction

This article aims to prove how the feminist movement in Kosovo has understood the powerful role that graffiti has to incite social reaction, which in this case is used to oppose women oppression. The article is focused only on the reaction of the feminist movement in relation to the women economic oppression, leaving aside other aspects of the criticism that is expressed through graffiti.

What is noticeable in this regard, and which is at the core of our article, is that the voluntary group, known as the Collective for Feminist Thought and Action in Kosovo, has used graffiti in at least two ways, first to expose the phenomenon of the oppression of women, and secondly to call for social revolt against it. In fact, our main research question is: *What does the feminist movement in Kosovo intend to express through graffiti in relation to the women economic oppression?*

We consider the research on this issue to be important due to the fact that when it comes to the economic oppression of women in a relatively traditional society like that of

Kosovo, there are at least three levels at which this discrimination occurs. The first is within the society itself, which is mainly manifested in housework and service to the family. In this aspect, at the global level, the inequality between men and women remains alarming, since "women do 2.6 times more unpaid care and domestic work than men" (UN, 2022). The other two levels are related to paid employment, in the public sector firstly and secondly in the private sector. In Kosovo, the State remains the largest employer with "22.3 percent of the number of employees in Kosovo based on the statistics from June 2023" (ASK, 2023). It is worth mentioning that quantitatively there are more women than men employed in the State administration, although in decision-making positions women are in a worse position compared to men. Meanwhile, there is no evidence on the difference in wages between women and men for the same job in the public sector. Whereas, in the private sector, there are many documented violations, some of which have been the sting of feminist criticism expressed through graffiti.

Thus, the concrete results of this study are structured in three main parts, in the analysis of feminist criticism of women's unpaid work, in state policies in relation to employment, as well as in the violation of the rights of workers (women) in the private sector. Also, the paper presents a socio-cultural context of Kosovo from a gender perspective, as well as a theoretical overview of feminist graffiti.

For this research, we used the Critical Discourse Analysis method as a qualitative research method. A total of nine graffiti, made in the Prishtina, the capital city and three other cities of Kosovo such as Vushtrri, Drenas and Lipjan were taken into consideration. These graffiti were made during 2021 – 2022, even though the Collective for Feminist Thought and Action was established in 2019, and they used graffiti since then but for other different topics not for women economic oppression topic. For research purposes, we have chosen the aforementioned locations because graffiti about our research topic took place there.

## 2. Graffiti as a form of social reaction – theoretical aspect and practical examples

In the basic meaning, graffiti is art expressed either through inscriptions, drawings or painting on walls in public spaces. Graffiti is expressed everywhere in the world, sometimes it is presented to us as an artistic view, but in many public spaces as an expression of social rebellion. Graffiti is a complex, mark-making phenomenon; a specific form of writing that usually occurs 'out of place', produced by the use of simple writing instruments, such as spray paint and marker pens (Pavoni, Zaimakis, & Campos, 2021).

Many social science researchers have defined graffiti by attempting to look beyond its basic meaning. Some have studied graffiti as a manifestation of vandalism by different groups of people in different cities and public spaces around the world.

As Alyson M. Mabie cited Ferrell "Graffiti writing is a form of rebellion" (1995). He said that it is performed intentionally against society and the law. "The analysis of graffiti can be used to gain insight into the cultural and social undercurrents of marginalized groups or subcultures within a city" (Mabie 2018, as cited in Phillips 1999). "The power of graffiti writing comes from its illicit nature, its rebellion and its

claim to public space by individuals or crews" (Mabie, 2018, p. 35).

On the other hand, there are researchers who have studied graffiti as an expression of social reaction in public spaces by different social groups that have experienced oppression in many forms.

A naturally democratic – although not necessarily legal – means of expression, urban streets, spaces and surfaces have always been a potential stage for the expression of more informal, vernacular, transgressive and counter-institutional forms of communication. Across the decades, writers, crews, activists, political groups and street artists have been using various strategies and tactics to disseminate marks of artistic experimentation, signs of existential quest, piercing sarcasm, idiosyncratic exhilaration and political dissent around the city surfaces (Pavoni, Zaimakis, & Campos, 2021). The sight of graffiti is an element of everyday life (albeit an ever-changing medium) in many urban landscapes and thus its production warrants description as an everyday act (Vogel, Arthur, Lepp, O'Driscoll, & Haworth, 2020).

Another topic that many researchers have noticed is the importance of public access to graffiti. Graffiti is written in public, if we think about publicness as a form of visibility. Graffiti is certainly visible – all too visible, according to those who want it eradicated (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011). Urban space is both a base and a tool for political expression, which can speak to the decision-making of politicians from the local to the international level (Hána & Šel, 2022). For example, messages are painted on walls by individuals who wish to express and represent themselves but perhaps feel that they lack a formal platform. In societies affected by conflict and political division, the representative and communicative functions of graffiti are particularly heightened. This is a result of the politicized nature of identity and/or space, and the transitional nature of state politics and thus formal representation (Vogel, Arthur, Lepp, O'Driscoll, & Haworth, 2020).

When we talk about graffiti, what usually stands out are the colors used to give the message. Within the universe of visual symbols, color plays a major role. Color is the most elusive formal element of visual and artistic language. And it is also a signifier in its purest state, since it reveals the arbitrary nature of the sign, the fact that signs only signify by

convention. The colors are polysemic. The same color can mean different things for different cultures, historical moments, people. Their meanings are a cultural and historical construction, regardless of the fact that all humans have the same color perception organs. Red so that we do not forget the socialist and communist origins of what is celebrated on March 8, the struggle of the female proletariat for their rights (Méndez Baiges, 2023).<sup>1</sup>

### 3. Kosovo's context in relation to women's rights

As a new country (2008), in the process of strengthening democracy, Kosovo undoubtedly has great challenges in economic and social development. And, perhaps even expected, women are one of the most affected social groups by these challenges. Femicide, domestic violence, sexual harassment and gender discrimination in employment are some of the issues faced by women in Kosovo.

One of the challenges faced by women in Kosovo, which is not always part of the public discourse, is the inactivity of women in the labor market and gender-based discrimination in employment. "Social and cultural factors contribute greatly to access to the labor market. Patriarchal societies suffer not only from the exclusion of women from the labor market, but also from gender discrimination in the workplace, from the lack of education opportunities for women and from professional standards determined by gender" (Abazi Morina & Delibashzade, 2017, p. 8).

Public discussion about gender discrimination and unequal opportunities for women in the labor market in Kosovo took place only in recent years. In fact, this topic has been put on the discussion tables by various non-governmental organizations and activists committed to equality and social justice.

One of them is the Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, formed in March 2019, which is a group composed of feminist activists that, as stated on the official website of this group, "aims to advance the ideals of equality gender through feminist theory and practice. Created on the principle of intersectionality, the KMVF engages in the ad-

vancement of gender justice and the promotion of local and global social equality" (KMVF, 2023).

There are dozens of actions that this group has undertaken since it was formed, opposing various issues related to gender discrimination, femicide, and sexual harassment. One of the most frequent forms of opposition that this group has used to express their revolt has been graffiti in various parts of Kosovo's cities. And, in this regard, there have also been criticisms of the economic oppression of women in Kosovo. Feminist criticism of women's economic violence in Kosovo is mainly created in connection with the criticism of the capitalist economic system, which they consider to be an unjust system and an obstacle to achieving social justice and real gender equality. Although in the public sector, the condition of workers is significantly better, in the private sector women face systematic exploitation and lower wages. They are often not allowed maternity leave. Overtime hours are not paid extra, including weekend working days. In many workplaces, employment contracts are not offered and, in many cases, they are offered for short -durations. According to a report by the KWN NGO (Kosovo Women Network), women in Kosovo have remained consistently under-represented in the labor market, both in terms of participation and employment. "Only one in five women is active in the labor market, while the rate of women's participation in the labor force is constantly around 20%" (Dobranja n.d.) One of the three main reasons women give for their inactivity at work remains family responsibilities (Mehmeti, Dobranja, & Hashani, 2017).

On average, women spend 7 hours and 30 minutes in paid work, and approximately an additional 3 hours in unpaid household work, and women who have children work an additional 45 more minutes at home, on average (Mehmeti, Dobranja, & Hashani, 2017).

One of the graffiti that can be seen on the streets of Prishtina, the capital city of Kosovo, "WOMEN, REVOLT!" is one of the calls that invites women to mobilize and oppose policies that do not support women, the patriarchal social mindset and institutional inaction in the protection of women. Even though this is actually an inscription in more general con-

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1 - Even though the color purple has been a symbol of the American women's movement since the early 1900s, we mentioned red color for the purposes of our article as the red color was used for graffiti writings as a symbol for the struggle for social justice.

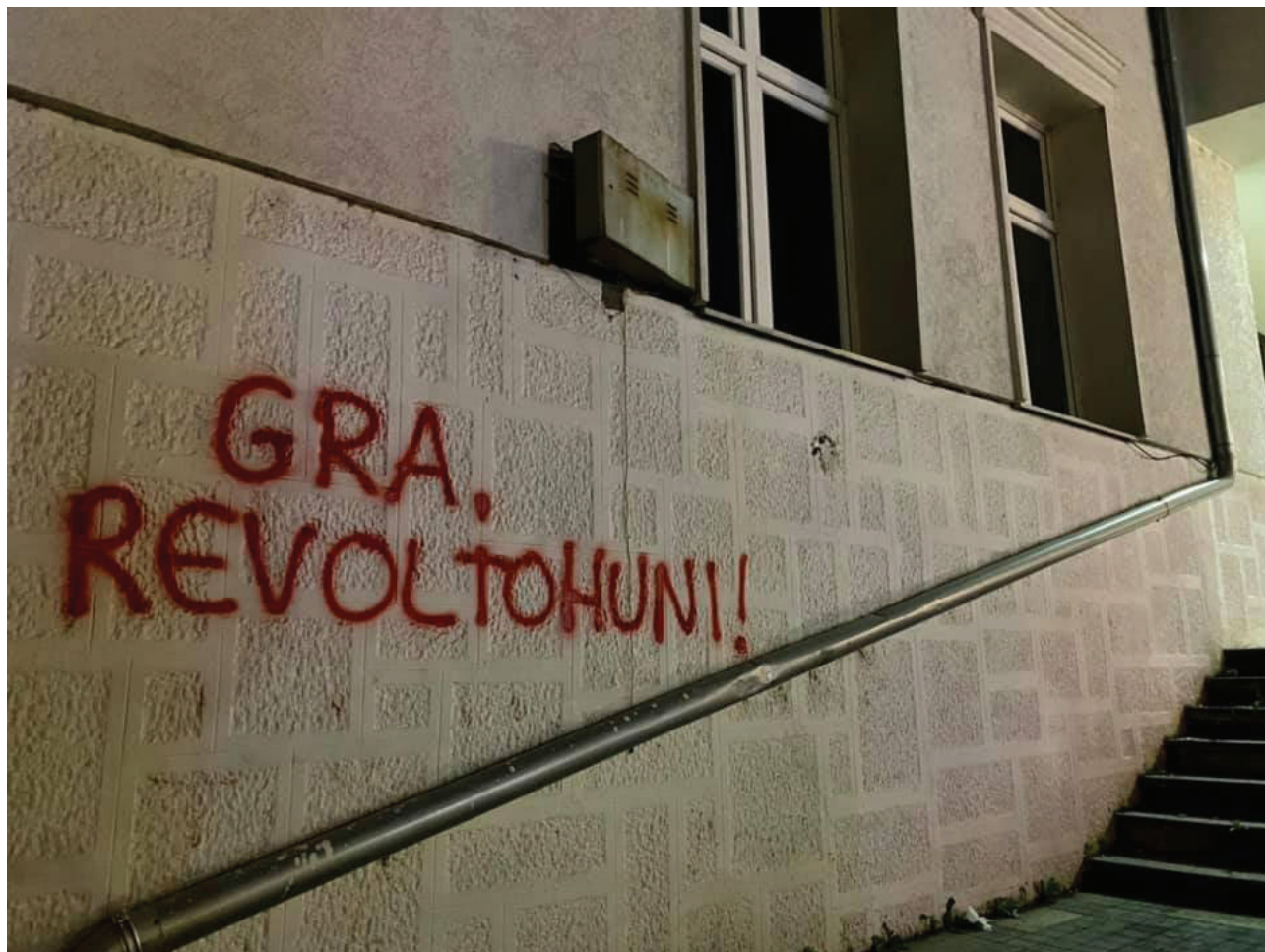


Figure 1: Graffiti in Prishtina with the inscription “WOMEN, REVOLT!”. Source: The Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, June 16<sup>th</sup> 2021, Facebook

text of women discrimination, but which includes the call for revolt against economic violence and gender-based discrimination in the labor market.

“In these conditions where women feel insecure precisely because they are women, where women are not trusted and where women’s bodies are used by the patriarchy, any social progress is impossible, as long as violence and this oppressive order is not punished. As long as the state’s violent oppression continues, we have to mobilize and oppose more strongly the oppressive, raping and murderous mentality acts of men and patriarchal institutions. Structural violence against women and the positioning of the State on the side of the rapists and the extreme ignorance of the life and safety of women must be fought with political means. Together, in revolt!” (Feminist, 2021)

#### 4. Unpaid work: Graffiti that opposes patriarchy

It is worth reiterating the fact that women’s unpaid work is a global problem. As stated in the introduction to this article, United Nations statistics show that women do 2.6 times more housework than men. Gender equality is the 5th goal of the UN Agenda 2030, within the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). And one of the indicators there is that “recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate” (UNDP, 2023).

In England, according to The Guardian “women ‘work for free for nearly two months’ a year, according to fresh anal-

ysis which reveals a 15% gender pay gap that widens ‘dramatically’ after women have children” (Neate & Topping, 2023).

In early 2023, the Institute for Social Policy “Musine Koka-lari” has published one study about unpaid work in Kosovo, titled “Who cares: Unpaid Care Work in Kosovo”. “The findings of this research project suggest that on average an individual spends 4.9 hours in direct and indirect unpaid care work in Kosovo. Women spend 6.2 hours and men 3.5 hours in unpaid care work, which means that women spend 2.7 hours or 44% more time on unpaid care work than men” (Drevinja & Ymeri, 2023, p. 8).

From the above statistics, it appears that women do almost twice as much unpaid work as men in Kosovo. Although statistically it seems that Kosovo stands better in relation to the global average of unpaid work, the cultural context continues to remain oppressive for women. Being a woman in Kosovar society continues to be related with the expectation of her service in the family and in household

chores. Likely, this is an unwritten norm that is reproduced in almost every culture. As bell hooks writes, as our society continues to be largely made up of ‘Christian’ culture, most people continue to believe that God has predestined women to be subservient to men in the family environment. “Even though multitudes of women are involved in the labor market, and because they are heads of households and financially the backbone of the family, the idea of family life that continues to survive in the nation’s imagination is what keeps male dominance intact by excluding the fact that men are they part of the family equation or not” (hooks, 2000). Specifically, this element of gender-based discrimination has been publicly emphasized through graffiti by the Collective for Feminist Thought and Action. One of the graffiti that has taken place on the walls of buildings in urban spaces in various cities of Kosovo is the one with the inscription “Women do not rest even on Sundays”. Graffiti can be considered as a sting that aims to expose the activity of women in unpaid work inside the home, without resting.



Figure 2: Graffiti in Prishtina with the inscription “Women do not rest even on Sundays”, April 27<sup>th</sup> 2022.

Source: Artan Krasniqi

Since it comes from the Collective... it cannot be disputed that the purpose of the graffiti is to emphasize the historical discrimination against women in doing housework. But the dilemma that may arise is whether this message is understood correctly by the targeted public. This graffiti does not directly convey the message, but rather encodes it. So, asserting a discriminatory fact against a social category, in this case against women, can inadvertently cause a tendency to normalize that discrimination. This conclusion is further emphasized by the fact that in traditional societies, there is basically the element that evaluates the unpaid work of the members of the society with the scale of the role that each member has in the society. In other words, traditional society expects women to serve for home and family members every day, without a schedule and without compensation. Therefore, to write that “she does not rest even on Sundays” can be considered simply as an acknowledgment of her expected contribution, and not as a criticism of the phenomenon. According to Lewis, in the 1970s, a group of feminists collaborating under the banner Wages for Housework (including Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Mariarosa Dalla Costa) which was internationalist but had particularly strong ties to New York and Italy, was not for housework at all, came up with a remarkably precise dictum to convey their perspective on the domestic labor performed by so many women in their own homes:

“They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work.” Pointedly, they did not deny that unwaged housework might be a manifestation of love. Rather, Wages for Housework argued that “nothing so effectively stifles our lives as the transformation into work of the activities and relations that satisfy our desires.” In other words, the fact that caring for a household under capitalism often is an expression of loving desire, while at the same time being life-choking work, is precisely the problem (Lewis, 2021).

One of the household chores, which is considered more of a burden for women in Albanian families in Kosovo, is serving tea, at least once a day, after dinner. Drinking tea can be considered a socio-cultural practice, part of the routine of many families. In some areas of the country, it is more present, for example in Vushtrri, a city on the northern side of Kosovo. Some time ago, a TV interview of an ordinary man from this city, carried out by a television with national

frequencies, had become viral, after he had declared that he “consumes up to 70 cups of tea a day”. The Collective..., taking advantage of being a viral statement, had decided to stigmatize this practice, writing exactly in the city of Vushtrri a graffiti, with the inscription: “70 all day huh? Pour it yourself!”



Figure 3: Graffiti in Vushtrri with the inscription “70 all day huh? Pour it yourself!”. Source: The Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2021

But just a few days later, there has been an intervention on this graffiti by someone else, making this wall of public space a forum for clashes of opposing attitudes. In the graffiti, the text “Pour it yourself” has been erased, and it was added the sentence “Right away, do you want to put some lemon?”. In this case, we can assume on two levels: the first, more likely, this intervention came from the defenders of the patriarchal order, who want to continue to see women in the position of servant within the home; even that she does this work without hesitation, as well as taking care to ask if more is needed; as an instinctive reaction that can come as a result of fear if society is starting to take for granted the narrative that men should serve themselves the tea they drink. A patriarchal man cannot imagine the idea that the woman can tell him “Pour the tea into the cup yourself”. The second, which is less likely to have happened, is simply ordinary mockery of the feminist backlash. A significant element is also the color with which the new graffiti is written. While feminist graffiti is written in red, this one opposing it is written in black.



Figure 4: Altered graffiti in Vushtrri, written in black color “Right away, do you want to put some lemon?”. Source: Jepi zë, Facebook, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021

Triggered by the high statistics of unpaid work, the Collective... has written graffiti all over Kosovo that highlight the contribution of women, but which is not recognized by the state in any form. The research of the “Musine Kokalari” institute has found that “the total estimated value of unpaid care work in Kosovo is € 2,824,248,757 or 33% of country GDP” (Drevinja & Ymeri, 2023). In 2023, the budget of the Republic of Kosovo is estimated to be around 3.2 billion euros.

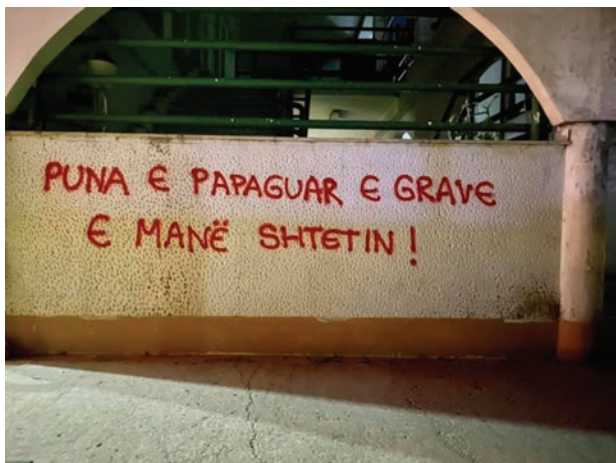


Figure 5: Graffiti in Drenas: “Unpaid work of women develop the country”. Source: The Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, Facebook, September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2021

So, as it was emphasized in the introduction of this article, the goal of the 5th objective of the 2030 Agenda is to recognize the contribution of women especially such as unpaid work. It should be noted that in the Law on Gender Equality in Kosovo, “unpaid work of women and men is considered as a contribution to the development of the family and the society in cases of: The care for family welfare; The care for children; The care for other members of the family; Dealing with agriculture and family economy” (The Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2015). “Subjects specified in paragraph 1 of this Article shall benefit from community services, labor policies and employment, and vocational training based on the legislation in force” (Ibid).

#### 4. Women in the workforce

##### 4.1. Public sector

“In general, in the labor market, women have a higher unemployment rate than men, are paid less than them for the same work, and are more discriminated” (Haxhiymeri & Gjermani). According to KAS, in the first three months of 2022, the unemployment rate in Kosovo was 16.6%. “The

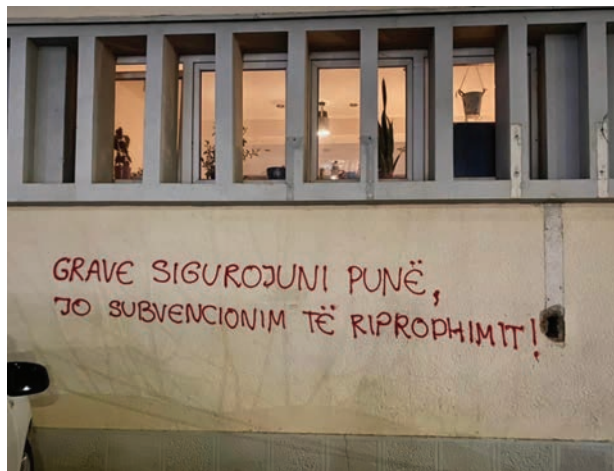


Figure 6: Graffiti in Drenas: “Women should be provided with jobs, not subsidizing reproduction”. Source: The Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, Facebook

2 According to the decisions made by the Government, women in maternity leave that were unemployed, in the last 12 months, would benefit from financial support of 170 Euros for 6 months, while those employed will benefit from financial support of 170 Euros for 3 months, in addition to the regular maternity leave compensation. The distribution of child allowances that include children had also started.

A new report from the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) warns that government policies aimed at raising, lowering or maintaining fertility rates can erode reproductive and human rights and says the goal should be to advance gender equality and the quality of life. The report also said most experts today agree that “population changes are normal, and population sizes are neither good nor bad; what is needed are resilient systems that can respond to the needs of a population, no matter what its size”. That includes advancing gender equality overall. In high-fertility countries, the report said, “empowerment through education and family planning” will lead to economic growth (Xing, 2023).

#### 4.2. Private sector

The Constitution of Kosovo in its preamble emphasizes the commitment to create a state of equal citizens, which will guarantee the rights of each citizen without exception (The Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, 2008). On the other hand, The Law on Labor, which regulates the rights and obligations between employers and employees in Kosovo through its provisions, also regulates the rights related to women in the workforce. In general, this law provides a number of provisions related to women in the workforce such as equal pay, the prohibition of discrimination in employment relations and the right to maternity leave. The law prohibits the early dismissal of women due to pregnancy, and other provisions that stipulates those pregnant women and those who breastfeed women are prohibited from performing heavy physical work or other work that may endanger reproductive health (Mehmeti, Dobranja, & Hashani, 2017).

Another critique of the feminist perspective focuses on the exploitation of women’s potential by enterprises and businesses in the private sector, in exchange for low wages. Even in Kosovo, the feminist movement has criticized this phenomenon. The most frequent forms of exploitation of women’s labor power in the private sector are: the lack of employment contracts, which is accompanied by the lack of payment of personal contributions, extended working hours, different wages for the same work.

Trade remains one of the sectors with the largest number of employees in Kosovo. According to the Statistics Agency

of Kosovo, this sector ranks second in terms of the number of employees after State administration, with 21.9 percent of all employees in Kosovo. Thus, 24.8 percent of employed women in Kosovo work in this economic activity (ASK, 2023). Women work mainly in shopping malls and supermarkets. The following graffiti mentions just some of these supermarket chains, which the feminist movement claims violate women’s rights at work. The graffiti says: “Viva Fresh, InterEX, ETC...: Millionaire at the expense of the workers”.



Figure 7: Graffiti in Lipjan: “Viva Fresh, Interex, ETC...: Millionaire at the expense of women workers”. Source: The Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, May 8<sup>th</sup> 2021, Facebook

The social burden of reproduction and child care is usually one of the main factors that hinder women in their career achievements and economic independence. “Pregnancy discrimination is a unique form of sex discrimination. Compared to other forms of discrimination, pregnancy discrimination happens quickly—when discriminating employers learn that an employee is pregnant, she is fired, often the same day” (McCann & Tomaskovic-Devey, 2021, p. 4).

Based on a research paper, published by Kosovo Women’s Network, one in five surveyed women said their work placed them and their unborn children at risk.

“31% of women employed while pregnant said they had to lift, carry, push, or pull loads; 80% had long periods of sitting or standing at work; nearly one-fourth were exposed to biological, chemical, or physical agents; 54% were exposed to



extreme temperatures (hot or cold) or vibrations; 8% had to do night work (defined as at least two hours between 22:00 and 05:00); and 53% had to work extended hours or overtime while pregnant” (Banjska, et al., 2022, p. 60).

The numbers show that this type of discrimination is also quite present in Kosovo. The statistic provided by the Agency for Free Legal Aid, that “they handled about 1,500 cases of women who left their jobs due to pregnancy” (Berisha, 2022) set feminists in Kosovo in action. In February 2022, the Collective... had tried to carry out an action in the Government building to oppose this phenomenon, but were prevented by the law enforcement authorities. But the Collective... had carried out the action in the walls of other institutions, justifying this action by stating that “economic violence against women, which is only increasing during the pandemic, all public institutions are to blame”.

“Instead of protecting workers, they are aligning on the side of the private sector. The dismissal of 1,500 pregnant women from work throughout 2021 is just an alarm that shows the multiple oppression of women in the labor market. And this alarm, not just shows the systemic violence against women, but also calls for the organization and revolt of working women, with or without a work contract. From every public space, we tell the state institutions that we want jobs, security and well-being, not subsidizing reproduction” (Kolektivi për Mendim dhe Veprim Feminist , 2022).

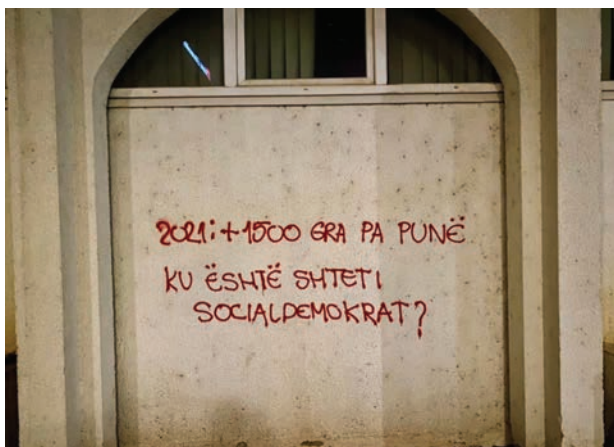


Figure 8: Graffiti in Prishtinë: “2021: +1500 women were dismissal. Where is the Social - Democratic State? Source: The Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, Facebook

In another graffiti, the Collective... has specifically criticized the work of the Labor Inspectorate, describing it as “the peon” of the private sector”.

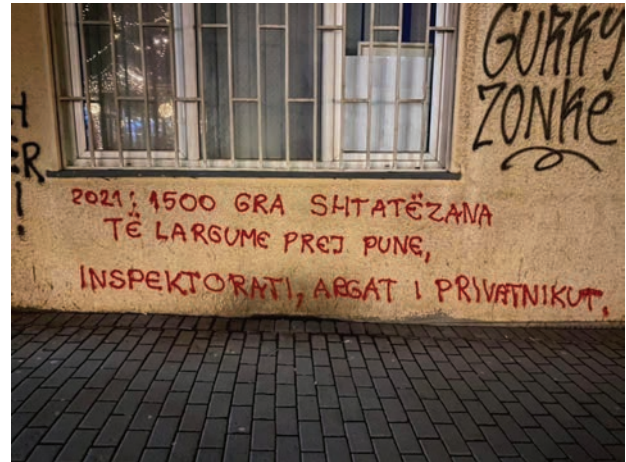


Figure 9: Graffiti in Prishtinë: “2021: 1500 pregnant women were dismissal. The Labor Inspectorate, the peon of the private sector. Source: The Collective for Feminist Thought and Action, February 12<sup>th</sup> 2022, Facebook

On the other hand, according to the annual work report of the Labor Inspectorate during 2022, this institution has carried out 6,316 inspections in total. In the conducted inspections, a total of 51,058 workers were treated, of the total number of workers (32,698 men, and 18,360 women). “The most frequent violations of the legal provisions made by the employer towards the workers regarding labor relations are: non-compensation for work during official and annual holidays, work during the weekend, night shift work, compensations, and dismissal from work” (Labour Inspectorate , 2023).

The LI has shown that about 90% of the inspections were carried out in the private sector, while 10% in the public sector. “From the violations recorded regarding holidays, 13 of them have to do with maternity leave” (Labour Inspectorate , 2023).

## 5. Conclusions

The feminist movement in Kosovo continuously uses graffiti as a means of social reaction and through it calls for revolt against the oppression and discrimination of women. As it

is also explained theoretically, since graffiti is always used in public spaces, it is a form that gives everyone the opportunity to have access to it, both the giver and the receiver of the message.

Feminist criticism in relation to the economic oppression of women in Kosovo is oriented in at least three directions, in the criticism of tradition and patriarchy that puts women at the center of family responsibilities of service and care for others in an unpaid job that extends 24/7; to state policies; and to private enterprises and businesses that illegally exploit the working potential of women.

Public spaces are used as a forum for discussion and confrontation of antagonistic approaches and opinions, where on the one hand the aim is to raise awareness against discrimination on the basis of gender, and on the other hand sometimes it reflects the lack of acceptance of criticism and the need to preserve the patriarchal order, and sometimes for mocking the criticism. Feminists in Kosovo always use the color red to express their revolt, even in graffiti.

In some cases, graffiti in Kosovo do not use direct language towards a certain phenomenon, but leave criticism implied. This raises the risk that by trying to criticize an act of discrimination, it can actually be normalized, precisely through the language used in the graffiti. An example of this is the graffiti that “women don’t rest even on Sundays”, which can be considered simply as an acknowledgment of her expected contribution, not as a criticism of the phenomenon.

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